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# THE ENGLISH LEAFLET

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## THE TEACHING OF THE ESSAY IN HIGH SCHOOL

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Girls' High School, Boston

SOME teachers there are, even English teachers, who can make a definite outline to cover their work for weeks at a time—and stick to it. I am told they devote one or two days a week to rhetoric, one to composition, and one to literature. Personally, I am either too scatter-brained or too logical to abide by such a schedule, no matter how carefully I plan it. I do not understand how any English teacher can put up such “Cloisons étanches,” as the old French Libertine used to say, between the different departments of his work. English teaching is so many-sided, so cumulative! It can not be definitely charted. Rather, it resembles the endless ellipse, small and larger, that the pupil laboriously struggles over in his penmanship practice. This seems especially true in the teaching of the essay. Is it to be approached from the angle of structure, content, or style? With my own especial problem of teaching it to large, cosmopolitan classes of “commercial” and “general” girls, I believe it is wisest to reach the essay wholly through the study of exposition, first showing that it is the development of a definite thought clearly expressed—concisely or diffusely as the subject matter demands or the author chooses, and, from this thought foundation, arrive at some appreciation of the author’s personality and style. In doing this I make no hard and fast division of written work and the study of models, but for the sake of clarity of expression, I shall treat the work under four main headings:

1. Approach through the teaching of exposition.
2. Study of the essays themselves.
3. Oral work.
4. Written work.

In this work, I may repeat, I have constantly attempted to plan this teaching of the essay to benefit the unimaginative, immature mind with which I have to deal. I have made no attempt to "hitch my wagon to a star."

The first step is to disabuse the class of the idea that exposition, of which the essay is such an important example, is an abstruse subject and to prove to them that it forms a very large proportion of their every day conversation. Rebecca, perhaps, at recess has been heard telling Julia just why Filomena's basket-ball game is so good. Rebecca has been indulging then in exposition! Then the definite work begins. Each girl should have in her English note book a working definition of the four main forms of prose composition. In her freshman and sophomore years, she has already studied simple narration and description. The four paragraphs in Scott and Denny's *Composition-Rhetoric* serve excellently here in the episode of the squirrel and the weasel, as they very clearly emphasize the distinction between these four divisions. That serves to fix exposition or explanation in its proper place, and makes clear that necessary distinction between the specific nature of description and the general nature of exposition. Then, since the first aim is to teach the clear expression of a definite idea, it is wise next to try to fells the bogey of "I know but I can't say it." It may prove valuable to take several lessons to teach the logical definition. It certainly serves to crystallize certain thought processes, and materially improves sloppy definitions. The definition is divided, of course into three parts:

1. Object to be defined.
  2. Genus or class.
  3. Differentia or distinguishing characteristic
- and the necessary work of limiting the genus or class brings

out some fairly clear thinking. A canny teacher may also do a good bit of other review work here by demanding definitions of poetic forms, figures of speech, grammar, etc. Next, may come a review of outline work, both the informal and the formal outline, with its necessary attention to proportion in the correct co-ordination and subordination of ideas. And here, it is wise to use a uniform outline plan of numbers and of letters, such as:

I

A

I

a

(1)

(a)

etc.

Such an essay as Irving's "The Voyage" is excellent for outline work, for it not only resolves itself into a logical outline, but is found, eventually, to be a good example of the essay with its three divisions of Introduction, Body, Conclusion. The next step, leading to more detailed work, is practical, in that it clarifies thought—paraphrasing. The figurative, poetic language of the author must be translated into every day clear cut language that will be plain to a twelve-year old child. Of course, endless material is to be found in Shakespeare alone—but it is a deadening thing to demand too much paraphrasing.

After these preliminary steps in clarifying the expression of the underlying thought, it is perhaps wise to begin the classroom study of the essay itself. In the Girls' High School it is possible to have class copies of Franklin, Addison and Steele, and Lamb for the Juniors; and of Carlyle and Macaulay for the Seniors. It is obviously important that the teacher know definitely from what angle she is to approach each of these essayists. An interesting introduction to the "Spectator Papers" is through "Henry Esmond" with its vivid picture of the manners and men of Queen Anne's period, and its pseudo "Spectator" paper. This novel, sup-



plemented by collateral reading, helps materially in the appreciation of the "humors" of the time and the style of the authors. With classes of girls, it is interesting, in addition to the "Sir Roger de Coverley Papers," to read the essays on "Pin Money," "Women's Head-dress," and several others which deal with eighteenth century femininity. Since Franklin imitated Addison, it is interesting next to study bits from "Poor Richard's Almanac" and "When I paid too much for my whistle," and the difference in style between the shrewd, every day wit of Franklin and the urbane dignity of his model is made apparent to the pupil. It is exceedingly helpful to place before the class some descriptive adjective, and fit as many as possible to the style of the author. Some excellent adjectives are suggested in the Introduction to Tanner's "Essays and Essay-Writing." A few that will be very suggestive to high school girls are: "melodious, graceful, picturesque, graphic, direct, forceful, polished, abrupt, rugged, tame, flat, wordy." After the study of life and manners, it is a pleasure to begin that most delightful of all essayists—Charles Lamb. If the time is limited, (and it usually is) it is most unwise to approach this author with the dictionary. If you do this you will kill every bit of spontaneity. I speak with authority, for I have done so. Rather, for once, let the teacher forget pedagogy, and be an inspired dictionary. Tell the pupils of the tragedy, the pathos, the bravery, and the whimsical humor of the man. Read them Swinburne's "Sonnet on Charles Lamb's Specimens of Dramatic Poets" and Landor's poem to Mary Lamb on the death of Charles Lamb and then begin the "Essays of Elia." Lamb will do the rest. The work will resolve itself into a study of personality. The essays that are most helpful to high-school girls are, perhaps, the following: "Dream Children," "A Dissertation on Roast Pig," "The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers," "Witches and Other Night Fears," "Poor Relations," "Old China," and "A Chapter on Ears." For the senior classes, an interesting preliminary to the study of

Macaulay's essays on Johnson and on Mme. D'Arblay is Irving's "Life of Goldsmith" and selections from Boswell's "Life of Johnson." These two essays naturally lend themselves to a study of allusions and to a review of technique, even to such details as topic sentences and transitions. Carlyle's "Essays on Burns," on the other hand, suggests a study of view-point and a discussion of the essentials of a good biography. Alongside this more careful class study, it is of course, necessary to send the pupil to the school library for an unsupervised reading of other essays. One excellent collection is "A Century of English Essays from Caxton through Belloc" in the Everyman edition. Hamilton Wright Mabie's "Backgrounds of Literature" is valuable, and it is well for them to read widely from our own American essayists, Holmes, Emerson, Lowell, Thoreau, Curtis, and Mitchell. Naturally, too, they should read the current magazines and such excellent collections as Tanner's "Essays and Essay Writing."

Much of this library work is reported to the class in the form of oral themes. Indeed, I have found oral themes to be invaluable in the teaching of exposition and the essay, and I give a good deal of class time to it. A preliminary, general assignment may be made something like this:

"Come to class on Wednesday prepared to tell the class of something you know how to do especially well."

That day we listen to brief expositions ranging from "How to make a sport skirt in an hour" to culinary secrets that disclose dark mysteries of Russian or Turkish delicacies. The next assignment demands more definite study; for example, a pupil may be told to look up Damascus and Damocles and then tell the class if a listener would be justified in feeling amused at hearing a street orator say dramatically that he felt as if the sword of Damascus were hanging over his head. The Harvard English A. Syllabus offers excellent material for such oral themes. Naturally, there are special assignments from the collateral reading. Ashley's "Social Life in the Reign of Queen Anne" suggests



brief themes on: Women's Dress, Daily Life of Women, Coffee Houses. Later, either a whole book, or a series of individual but related topics is assigned several weeks in advance, and each pupil in turn lectures to the class. The class takes notes on the one work and finally a test is given on the whole. This is exceedingly valuable in giving the pupil a feeling of dignity and of poise. A final and most interesting assignment may combine both clear thinking and an expression of literary appreciation. Each girl is told to bring a lyric poem to class, taken from a newspaper or a current magazine. The author is to be one whose name is unfamiliar to her. She reads the poem aloud to the class, paraphrases it, comments on its rhyme, metre, and figures of speech, and then tells the class why she has considered it worthy to be brought to their attention.

Naturally, however, the most interesting and, frequently, to the teacher the most discouraging part of the work is the written essay of the pupil. Here, too, it is interesting to begin with simple paraphrasing and, alas, the distress of the teacher is complete when the voluble, glib, imaginative pupil who is so effective in oral recitations, passes in a paraphrase of:

"So are those crisped, snaky, golden locks,  
Which make such wanton gambols with the wind,  
Upon supposèd fairness, often known  
To be the dowry of a second head,  
The skull that bred them in the sepulchre"

in these words which I recently received:

"Some person who is dead and it is there hair and is made a whig out of it, and some other person buys it"!

Even admitting such discouraging results, paraphrasing, if not carried to excess, is excellent. If a class is at all clever I give them this bit from Emerson's "Nature" with the promise that a *summa cum laude* in paraphrasing will be given to the person who can do it successfully. (Like all such degrees, it is accorded to few!)

"Geology has initiated us into the secularity of nature. We know nothing rightly for want of perspective. Now we learn what patient periods must round themselves

before the rock is formed: then before the rock is broken, and the first lichen race has disintegrated the thinnest external plate into evil, and opened the door for remote Flora, Fauna, Ceres, and Pomona to come in. How far off yet is the trilobite! how far the quadruped! how inconceivably remote is man! All duly arrive, and then race after race of men. It is a long way from granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato and the preaching of the immortality of the soul. Yet all must come, as surely as the first atom has two sides."

Next brief expository paragraphs may be written:

"If my fairy godmother would grant me three wishes I should wish . . ." or perhaps,

"I want a good book to read. It must be about . . ."

This naturally leads to a review of transitional words or phrases and to the longer theme. An assignment that is likely to produce good results is a theme of two paragraphs, the first definite, vivid, written with the "eye on the object," a description of a person the pupil knows well and admires; the second paragraph, linked to the first by a careful transition, a careful character exposition of that person. In order that the pupil may feel able to write accurately and freely, it is wise to allow him to employ Lamb's favorite method of mystifying the reader by allowing one person to masquerade under the name of another. Occasionally the results are amusing, especially the "artful" transition of one conscientious pupil who made this the connecting link between the two paragraphs:

"But if her exterior is beautiful, her interior is even more so!"

It is well to assign at least one formal essay, with all the panoply of library work, written notes, and preliminary outline work. As far as the more interesting, informal essay is concerned, imitation of literary models is valuable in that it shows appreciation of style and of character development. To mention only a few subjects: the study of the "Sir Roger de Coverley Papers" suggests,

Sir Roger and I go "Window-Shopping" on Boylston Street.

Sir Roger Comments on the Feminine Styles of 1921.



Sir Roger Comments on Present Day Hair Dressing; or Franklin's "The Whistle" suggests,

"Whistles that have tempted me"; and the reading of Mitchell, Curtis, or Lamb's "Dream Children" suggests to the imaginative girl any number of "what-might-have-been" essays. Personally, I know of no other author who lends himself so delightfully to the pupil as does Lamb. His "Poor Relations" suggested a very biting and clever complaint from one girl in "Rich Relatives" and the "Essay on Ears" inspired an amusing paper beginning with "Reader, I have no taste," and ending, "And so, Reader, I have no taste for—Lamb." Apart from the imitative work, there is obviously a very large number of subjects for the familiar essay. An *English Leaflet* reprinted as an appendix in Thomas's "The Teaching of English in the Secondary Schools," and the appendix to "Essays and Essay Writing" offer countless suggestive subjects. Many subjects naturally develop from the pupil's own personality. For Seniors especially, it is valuable, perhaps, after the study of Burke and his three possible methods of dealing with the American spirit of liberty, to give the pupil a theme with a date some five years ahead for a subject, perhaps, for instance "1926." The pupil may then divide her theme into:

1. What I should like to be doing in 1926.
2. What my mother would like to have me doing in 1926.
3. What I probably shall be doing in 1926.

After all, it is well named—an essay, a trial, and the teacher feels too often after trying for weeks to teach it that her attempts are merely a tentative essay themselves. Her results happily may not wholly be measured by the red-ink marks in her record book! And if her pupil, through the study of the essay has learned that not all interesting literature is bound between the covers of the modern novel or short-story magazine the teacher may feel her work has not been in vain. She may not have "hitched her wagon to a star" but she surely has shared a bit of the "star-dust" of her own inspiration. And, if that be possible, no lack of immediate and tangible result can discourage her.



## EDITORIAL NOTES

THE three succeeding numbers of *The English Leaflet* will be issued under the editorial supervision of Miss Caroline M. Doonan, of the Newton Technical High School.

The regular editor, during the next four months, has planned to be in Europe, spending most of his time in England, where he is hoping to make a brief study of the methods of teaching English in some of the more prominent English schools. He will return before the second semester opens at Harvard, where he is again scheduled for his course in the Teaching of English in the Secondary Schools.

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### BOSTON TRAVELER SHORT STORY CONTEST

THE Boston Traveler Fourth Annual Short Story Contest for High School students of New England, which started the first of the month and ends October 31, bids fair to be the most successful contest ever run by the Traveler. The stories have been submitted in larger numbers than ever before and the standard of those read has proved exceedingly high.

This contest is open to all pupils regularly enrolled in any New England high school. Stories are limited to 1000 words and must be endorsed by the English teacher or by the principal of the School as being to the best of their knowledge the original work of the pupil.

Six prizes will be awarded, first \$50, second \$35, third \$20, fourth \$10, fifth \$5, sixth \$5. In addition to these prizes a special prize of \$3 will be awarded to every story published in the Traveler during the contest. All manuscripts, with stamps enclosed for return, should be addressed to the Short Story Editor, Boston Traveler.

Many readers will recall the suggestive paper in the April, 1921 *Leaflet* entitled *A Plan for Verse-Making in the Ninth Year*, by Miss Lucy H. Chapman of the Chestnut Street Junior High School, Springfield, Mass. Miss Chapman has sent us an interesting poem which shows what the creative influence of the classroom accomplished for one thirteen-year-old girl.

#### ELLEN GOES TO THE LOWLANDS

Ellen has to the lowlands gone.  
With Allan Bane went she,  
Just as the dusk had settled down  
Over the forest free.

Ellen reached the castle grim  
Just at the break of day,  
When the castle gates were open flung  
By the watchman, spry and gay.

Into the court was Ellen brought  
By the power of the signet ring.  
She shyly looked about the room,  
But could not find the king.

She turned to her escort, James Fitz James,  
And saw that the king was he.  
She asked him to redeem his ring  
And set her father free.

Both her father and Malcolm Graeme  
Were freed by the generous king.  
He freed them both for Ellen's sake  
And the sake of the signet ring.

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And speaking of creative influence, here's an essay, written by a high-school student who had in class been studying the personal essay and had there caught the spirit of authorship. Don't you think the teacher's pride in sending this to us is wholesome—and quite pardonable? We at least are proud to print it.

## PERSONALITY AND PENCILS

There are a thousand schemes for entrapping the elusive myth, personality—that strange part of us that is the sum of all that we are. They say that we betray it by the clothes we wear, by the rooms we live in, by the food we eat, by the way we walk, by the way we write, and, I would add to the grand total, by *the pencils we write with!* For in all other things but this we are influenced by public opinion. We wear what our friends and relatives tell us is becoming; we accept the hints of the *House Beautiful* and *The Ladies' Home Journal* in furnishing our homes; we eat what Mr. Hoover tells us to, and we affect the postures and handwriting of our favorite movie actor. But no mother ever told her daughter that a green pencil went better with her pink dress than a yellow one. No advertiser boasts that Mary Pickford uses his Special Brass-Tipped No. 2 exclusively. The stern hand of law and the compelling one of fashion do not touch our pencils. By being below the notice, they are above the interference of outsiders; and on them we unconsciously record our personality.

Just lift up the desk lids of your friends and look into their minds. Here is one girl, outwardly the incarnation of mild conservatism, who betrays an inward love of barbaric display by a copious collection of long pencils, red, green, and yellow, striped, and shaded, and lettered in gold. Here is a girl whom you always thought calm and carefree. But these chewed and ugly stumps show her to possess a mind gnawed with care. Here is a dainty and feminine person with a neat silver pencil. There is a thoughtless individual who has none at all. You have a feeling that she borrows from her friends and looks over their shoulders at what they are writing. And in this desk are three dark red cylinders, sharpened to a hair's thickness. Here we have a fastidious person, pleased with herself, and a little too interested in her tools to be greatly interested in her work.

And if the pencils themselves, factory made, are such tell-tales, how much more so are the movements we make in handling them! One girl will poise hers delicately between thumb and forefinger and, flourishing her little finger, write in an elaborate script. You may spot her as the owner of a vain and idle mind. The next girl will grasp hers near the point and scratch off her words in a violent concentra-



tion of energy and ability. Another will hold hers rather high up, with a light but firm touch. She is the artistic girl who can draw. The nervous girl will continually tap and fool with hers and leave her mark on whatever objects come within her reach. The careless girl you will usually see making a series of vague darts into her desk and books, to try to remember where on earth she left her pencil.

Then observe the points of the pencils of your friends and you will be able to put the finishing touches to your estimate of their characters. The stingy girl shave hers off with a bare quarter inch of wood showing and a nasty pin-prick of a point. The generous girl lays bare a long, free sweep of unvarnished wood and lead. The girl of a mechanical mind grinds hers in a pencil sharpener. The precise person's knife-strokes form geometrical triangles in the cut wood, while those of the careless one wander towards the point in bumpy curves.

And one and all doubtless think they hold in their hands a servile stick that must helplessly write out their thoughts. But all the time the pencil laughs and writes on itself their inmost secrets.

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and

PROF. ASHLEY H. THORNDIKE, Columbia University

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